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Sandeep Bakshi

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Towards the unmaking of canons: Decolonising the study of literature

Sandeep Bakshi

Université de Paris, LARCA, CNRS, F-75013 Paris, France

Abstract

The political demand of re-assessments of university syllabi through student-led initiatives has offered critical pathways to theorise decolonial curriculum. The emphasis on diversity and inclusion has emerged as one key outcome of such reflections. As a relatively recent conceptualisation, decolonising the university and its teaching content and praxis has received scant academic focus and as a fast-evolving field, it has gained widespread, albeit uncritical, acceptance without adequate probing of what constitutes decolonial syllabi. The urgent call to decolonise the curriculum therefore requires additional scrutiny in terms of the content that informs the praxis of university teaching.

Extending the compelling reflections on university syllabi, this essay propounds the idea of ‘unmaking of canons’ in literary studies. It queries the terms associated with decolonising curriculums, such as diversity and inclusion, to clear the space for building a “decolonial option” in canonical literary knowledges. In so doing, this contribution traces the constitution of decolonial literary fields by proposing routes for their construction.

Decolonising literary knowledges, underpinning both the canon-(un)making exercise and critical pedagogy comprising university teaching, necessitates in Ngūgĩ wa Thiongō’s words (1986, p. 87), ‘a quest for relevance’ that signifies ‘the search for a liberating perspective within which to see ourselves clearly in relation to ourselves and to other selves in the universe.’ In contemporary times, student-led political mobilisation of decolonising the academy (Rhodes Must Fall, Decolonise the curriculum movement in several universities, Building the anti-racist classroom (BARC) at the University of Kent) have signalled the critical introspection of and the liberation from ‘the operation of whiteness’ prevalent in university spaces (Emejulu 2018, p. 173). Translating critique into political demands has cleared space for critical thinking on ethnocentric bias in university syllabi, which inexorably hinge on an excessive majority of DWMs (Deceased white males) with token inclusion of their others under the umbrella rubric of diversity. Constituting the decolonial route ‘to seek out ‘liberatory’ spaces from which to carve out ways to resist different structural forms of coloniality and racism or racialisation within the western academy’ (Jivraj, 2020), grassroots activism has brought into focus systemic praxes that uphold and maintain conventional western formations of knowledge(s) in almost all academic disciplines and reading lists.¹

Canons in the un-making

In July 2019, a Martinican student, Alexane Ozier-Lafontaine, boycotted the French Baccalaureate examination on the canonical author Victor Hugo, citing the complex

intertwining of racism, the literary canon and French colonialism in the Martinique. In an elegantly worded video, she denounced the absence of engagement with Hugo's racism in her studies and appealed for an informed appraisal of the author, who she called a 'raciste notoire' (Ozier-Lafontaine A 2019).

Ozier-Lafontaine's call to pontificate upon the implications of erasing problematic legacies of racism for Black and other students of colour resonates with the institutional hegemony of DWMs in literary canons in both French and English literatures. Canons, as Walter Mignolo (1991; 1992) and Edward Said (1994) contend, invariably function along exclusionary axes whilst demonstrating hegemonic power of institutions to legitimise the (re-)production of canonical knowledges, often uncritically. Additionally, in the realm of English studies, formal canonisation of English literature as a discipline was coeval with the demands of colonial administration to produce a canon of English literature for the British Indian civil services (Loomba 1998, p. 85).² Given the pervasive inter-implication of colonisation and national literatures, Ozier-Lafontaine's attempt to hold French literary studies and pedagogies to account articulates the decolonial plea of building knowledges through, to borrow from Josie Gill (2018, p. 285), 'different kinds of academic facts and different ways of knowing'. It traverses further than a trite critique of exclusionary strategies towards unmaking established canons of literature by instructing how pedagogies cannot obliterate racial paradigms in enhanced claims of universalism.³

Unmaking canons, especially in literary studies, requires rigorous critiques of existing eurocentric categories of knowledge formation. Compellingly, it demands a nuanced approach to reflect upon the historical conjunction of colonial politics and canon consolidation as one explanatory instance of exclusions, and concurrently, offer comprehensive accounts of canonical authors of literature without eliding critical questions of privilege in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and social capital among others.⁴ Contemporary close readings of canonical texts do address concerns highlighted above; however, making it routine practice serves as an integral function of engaged pedagogies to 'conceive an after eurocentrism', to use Qadri Ismail's phrase (2017, p. 44).

Enumerating processes of marginalisation of the others of DWM instantiates the political demand of their inclusion. Postcolonial literatures and theories restore the postcolonial canon in English literature and additionally provide techniques of interpretation with regard to established literary figures. Unmaking canons as a strategic tool promotes a supplementary exercise in addressing the erasure of critical legacies nevertheless. Whilst Homer, Virgil or Sophocles operate as archival reference for English or French literatures, teaching practices for

non-western authors included in the postcolonial canon tediously compare them to eurocentric formations of knowledges. Critical genealogies, for instance of entrenched caste hierarchy in the case of Arundhati Roy's work or oral traditions in Chinua Achebe's writings,⁵ in languages other than English receive scant engagement in literary critiques and teaching. Such marginalisation inevitably illustrates the hegemony of eurocentric referencing whereby excavation of literary archival knowledges remains unchallenged due to the insufficient probing of knowledge systems in non-euro-american cultures and languages. Unmaking canons as critical pedagogy therefore strives to offer an exhaustive access to pluriversal knowledges without diminishing the scope of euro-american frames, which figure as *one* of the knowledge systems among others.

Proposition I: Decolonise the literary syllabus

Suturing languages – English or French – to aspirations of national literatures, Peter McDonald (2019) advocates the proliferation of 'foreign languages' as headway towards jettisoning 'silo mentalities' and decolonising literary studies. McDonald further envisages inclusion of world literatures as Rabindranath Tagore fashioned it (Vishva Sahitya) and knowledges of 'other' languages to provide an antidote to colonial-era silos of literary knowledge, i.e., canons. Decolonising literary curriculum, in this regard, attempts to disaggregate canonical formations through processes of inclusion of the others of canon. However, diversity in syllabi, akin to institutional diversity and inclusion discourse, does not automatically guarantee termination of disciplinary canons. As Sara Ahmed (2012, pp. 150-155) contends, diversity and inclusion speak manoeuvres racism into a modality of exception to the rule. Further, inclusion of diverse and minority-ethnic authors *increasingly* figures as a 'fundamentally tokenistic' praxis (Patel 2017).

Given the ubiquity of the canon and its reproduction *ad infinitum*, the decolonial turn would indeed benefit from an opening up to world literatures, as McDonald suggests. Concurrently, a carefully inflected turn from *what* to *how* of syllabus pedagogy will enable literary scholars and instructors to undertake the task of not merely gesturing towards diversifying the curriculum but effectuating decolonising the praxes associated with it. Imparting knowledge and by extension systems of thinking that partake in its formation demands a systematic engagement with pluralising *our* pedagogical praxes. For instance, addressing Shakespeare's oeuvre occasions making pathways into texts of similar but critical themes, such that Shakespeare's meta-canonical status is called into question. Relentlessly reading *The Tempest* (1611) in a critically analogous frame with the first extant slave-memoir

of Olaudah Equiano (1789) redresses the erasure of literary figures deemed minor(-ity) authors in canonical consideration. Similar instances of parallel examination have indeed developed in several literary syllabi across universities offering a co-reading of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). However, it behoves literary curricula to render such an analytic of critical re-writing an integral part of pedagogies of teaching and researching, without which the ‘meaning(fulness)’ of literature remains elusive. The absence of this conceptualisation of *the how* (not simply the *know-how*) of praxes, in this respect, figures as a grave oversight. In other words, defying inclusion, *our* pedagogies of decolonising the curriculum must gesture towards a decalcification of the canon to concatenate authors and themes together in a critical bind.

Periodisation of the canon, another meta-canonical feature, exemplifies the stronghold of disciplinary temporal boundaries. In this regard, American literature produced in English, obliterating oral and written pre-colonial accounts, appears as the origin of *all* literature of the United States. The unmaking of literary canons in this context would imply relieving literary texts from the coercive domain of periods and movements. Reading Toni Morrison’s reworking of the character of Desdemona’s African nurse, Barbary, (*Desdemona*, 2011) brings to the centre etiolated narratives of valour. As works of fiction that speak to each other, operating in complementarity, the inter-relation of Shakespeare and Morrison’s texts uncovers the arbitrary fastening of literature to periods. A decolonising stance in literary studies, then, would imperatively work towards forging such interconnections. Making the linkages between authors, characters, and periods sustains the overall coherent structure of knowledge-making and simultaneously, allows entrenched erasures of literary narratives to emerge tactfully and forcefully instead of their occasional inclusion.

Proposition II: Decolonise the literary syllabus

Intimately connected to processes of epistemological normalisation, the making of the disciplinary canon (literary, philosophical ...) bespeaks *a/the* intellectual tradition always in direct reference to western thinking, and, almost always fixes the locus as the Euro-American academy, what Linda Tuhiwai terms ‘the inherent dominance of Western knowledge’ (1999, p. 100). As such, this cognitive movement gets instituted as knowledge and further serves to provide power to those who successfully re-produce it. The move away from non-Eurocentric enunciation and repetition of knowledge and intellectual practice is salutary with a view to engaging with the pluriversal ways of being in our world(s). However, any departure from the disciplinary canon inevitably results in the marginalization of those who depart from it and the subsequent reinforcement/renaturalisation of the centrality Euro-American canon. The Euro-

American canon therefore functions as the guarantor of its self-perpetuation, the gatekeeper of the production of knowledge, and more importantly, it works to undermine, delimit and control other enunciations of knowledge(s) through declaiming itself as a universal category, and, erecting the master meta-narrative of the eurocentred norm.

Decolonising the curriculum, especially in literary studies grapples with existing systems of knowledge, pontificating upon and presenting another option to the self-referential canonical system based on eurocentrism that relegates other knowledge systems to the peripheries as such. In his elucidation of decoloniality, Mignolo expostulates on the risks associated with repeating received frameworks of knowledge. He declaims,

You may be enacting some options without knowing you are, because you think, or have been educated to believe, that there is only one option (cf., totality of knowledge) that corresponds to reality, and what is left is to engage in the conflict of interpretations within the logic of what seems to be the only option. (2018, p. 224)

Bringing forward a ‘conflict of interpretations’, decolonial thinking proffers an exit from a regime of ‘totality of knowledge’ and knowledge-making. This tension of reading/re-reading in literary studies connotes the absence of engagement with disciplinary inclusion/exclusion binary. Instead, it makes a salutary gesture towards re-orienting and reframing processes of knowledge formation. Whilst signalling inclusion in the literary canon inevitably makes the processes of exclusion intelligible, the effective accomplishment of the work to decalcify and unmake the canon organises around the presentation of multitude of interpretations. The complaint about exclusion from the canon can thus reconfigure as a political demand for transformation as in the case of student-led movements in the United Kingdom, notably the Decolonise UKC at the University of Kent. Potentially thus, decolonial options lead to re-imagining canon formations that appear as an exercise in regimenting and coercing knowledges into a totality of experience that eschews pluri-dimensional perspectives. In the literary field, the decolonial option would enable a multiplication of co-imbricating texts, contexts, narratives and histories in a cognate field of interpretations.

Several literary and analytical practices invite us to think *why* a particular work of literature figures in the canon whilst our pedagogies attach themselves to reflect upon the historical and social contexts through which works of literature attain canonical status. However, one key aspiration of decolonising literary studies places emphasis on transformative politics in research and teaching. Without aiming to undertake symbolic and/or metaphorical, albeit useful, change through facile inclusion of diverse world literatures, decolonising contextually professes for (re-)generative themes resulting in the ‘practice of freedom’, to

borrow from Paulo Freire's terminology (2005, p. 96). Such themes in literatures strenuously repudiate the aggregation of *a* particular canon by introducing it as a complex formation of multi-disciplinary systems of knowledges, including oral and multi-language sources, and, racial, sexual and gendered archives among others. Additionally, generative discussions of literary value and taste emerge as highly unstable and arbitrary, such that the unmaking of canons illustrates the impossible existence of *a single* canon.

The establishment of non-eurocentric academy in the context of knowledge formations impels a comprehensive engagement with continuing genealogies of plural knowledge systems. Encapsulating historically enduring cultural practices, written or non-written cultural memorabilia, such as, culinary traditions, sartorial customs, rites, rituals, and religious conventions to name a few, provides access to knowledge archives which remain at the peripheries. Practices of incorporating such valuable archives in the study of literatures do not operate as an uncritical call to authenticity (of 'other' cultures'), they allow referential access to knowledge systems that offer other ways of being and knowing in the world instead. In the literary field, engagement with Arundhati Roy's fiction, for instance, necessitates addressing established archives of caste and hijras in languages and language systems other than English. In the case of Chinua Achebe, taught in several university programmes on postcolonial literatures, archival access to oral narratives constitutes a significant step in decolonising the disciplinary confines of literature that locates written and oral archives in hierarchical frames. Without a meticulous commitment to making the study of literature pluralised in terms of language, cultures and literary tradition, the meaning of several works of literature remains elusive. In sum, the decolonial option for literary syllabi foregrounds the archives and processes that produce a particular work of literature (oral or written) even when they emanate from other languages, cultures and literary traditions. The invitation to access multi-language/multi-focal archive of knowledges proffers a serendipitous opportunity to researchers, educators, and curriculum-design partners to work in a regenerative frame of shared knowledge-making. Any successful inclusion of Roy or Achebe, therefore, hinges upon *how* knowledge of and around their works unfolds.

Overall, decolonising the study of literature does not imply the erasure of canonical works (certainly not Shakespeare in English studies), nor does it signify providing evidence of any superiority of non-western literatures through their tokenistic inclusion. Instead, the move to decolonise literary syllabi considers the veritable question of *how* a work of literature is produced and *how* we consider it as partaking in a specific reading list. In other words, it pivots

on decolonising *our* methodology of relating to and teaching literature. It has the potential to delink the now untenable attachment of the global North with knowledge and that of the global South with culture and cultural practices. Indeed, this potentiality of re-distributing power in the realms of knowledges and cultures directly challenges the uninterrupted racist hold over epistemological ‘veritas’. Additionally, without failing the premise of objectivity, it transforms the purported objective inquiry of the knowing and/or the non-knowing subject into an ethical interrogation through placing knowledge and culture *in parallel frames* and not in binary opposition to each other. The multiplicity of mediums – written and oral literatures, performances, ritual practices – renders the stringent borders between disciplines redundant and offers a glimpse of the seamless disciplinary boundaries that make our worlds intelligible. A non-eurocentric academy in this regard materialises through the dissemination of multiply organized voices and perspectives that attempt to dissolve the Euro-American centre by arguing for pluri-local productions of knowledge. Perhaps, this shift enacts a form of epistemic disobedience to a *singular* hegemonic centre.

Endnotes

¹ For instance, Lolo Olufemi (2017) argues for the liberation of English literature curricula in universities through a recognition of postcolonial literatures as integral to British literature.

² Contemporary discussions in various contexts of former British colonies signal the presence of English literature as a vehicle of disciplinary power (Highman 2019).

³ Exclusions operate in multiple ways with a cyclical movement of inclusion-exclusion. For instance, despite being the most included poet of negritude in the French literature Baccalaureate examination, Aimé Césaire was excluded from the 2009 curricula, setting a precedent for an exclusively white curriculum.

⁴ Gurminder Bhambra (2020), for instance, asserts the critical importance of conceptualising critique of eurocentrism as only one form of ‘epistemological redress’.

⁵ For the exclusion of the oral archives from literary canons in Latin American literatures, see Mignolo (1992, p. 66).

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